

Beyond the 'anti-national' tag

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ON 8 May 2018, around twenty people reached one of the gates of Jamia Millia Islamia. It was towards the late afternoon when the day's work at the university was getting wrapped up. In a frenzied manner, these individuals swung into action and started raising slogans: *Jinnah premi desh chhoro!* (Jinnah-lovers leave the country) and *Hinduon ka apmaan nahin sahega Hindustan!* (India will not tolerate insults – read discrimination – against Hindus). These slogans were more than simply being loud and communal in nature and tone.

The protesters accused Jamia of being 'anti-Hindu' and of indulging in 'insulting the country'.¹ It later transpired that the protesters were not even students of Jamia; they were mobilized from areas nearby. It was alleged that they were members of Hindu communal outfits. Fortunately, things did not take a violent turn as their attempt to storm into the campus through the gate was thwarted. Nevertheless, the activists did succeed in creating a ruckus, thereby leaving the Jamia fraternity in the grip of anxiety and insecurity.

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1. 'After AMU, Ruckus in Jamia Over Jinnah', *The Times of India*, New Delhi, 9 May 2018. Accessed online, 18 January 2021, URL: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/after-amu-ruckus-in-jamia-over-jinnah/articleshow/64086907.cms>

A year later, in the winter of 2019, Jamia was accused of being 'anti-national' by the same Hindu communal forces. This time, the university came under state crackdown and several Jamia students were mercilessly beaten up.² On 15 December 2019, the police indiscriminately and vengefully rained batons on peaceful protesters sitting near Jamia opposing a law they felt was based on religious discrimination – the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). The recently amended act allowed non-Muslim migrants from neighbouring countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh to get Indian citizenship, while Muslim migrants from the same countries were consciously kept out of the ambit of the law. Commenting on the act, a former chief justice of the Delhi High Court, A.P. Shah, argued that the law was against the basic structure of the Constitution, and the constitutional principle of secularism.³

With the opposition in Parliament clueless about how to deal with the situation, and a large section of the media supporting the establishment's

2. "'We Heard Gunfire': Jamia Students Detail Police Attack on Campus", *Al Jazeera*, 18 December 2019. Accessed online, 20 January 2021, URL, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/12/18/we-heard-gunfire-jamia-students-detail-police-attack-on-campus>

3. Former Chief Justice of the Delhi High Court, A.P. Shah has argued that CAA is against secularism and it violates the basic structure of the Indian Constitution. See, "'CAA Violates Secularism, Basic Structure of Constitution': A.P. Shah", *The Wire*, 31 Janu-

agenda, Jamia had to lead a peaceful and democratic protest against the CAA. The government, instead of listening to the dissenters and finding a solution through dialogue, resorted to the use of force. To give legitimacy for using force, the propaganda machinery attacked Jamia, accusing the institution of being 'anti-national'. The mouthpiece of the Hindu communal forces went on to charge the university with reviving a new *Khilafat* in opposition to India's secular democracy.⁴

According to historian Ishtiaq Husain Qureshi, 'khalifa' is an Arabic word, which means 'one who comes after a successor'. After the death of Prophet Mohammad, Abu Bakr was 'selected as the head of the Muslim community'. Afterwards, the system of khilafat came to be seen as a symbol of pan-Islamism and Muslims as a unified community. But uniting Muslims, who are divided along class, sects and regions, has often been a difficult task. In fact, achieving unity among Muslims under a single political authority has been more an ideal and less a reality. Qureshi, too, affirmed this argument: 'In the beginning it was considered necessary that the entire Muslim community should form a single polity, but later events shattered such a possibility and the khilafat gradually sank into an effete political institution.'⁵

But communal forces have been so allergic to Muslims asserting their

rights that any democratic assertion by them was viewed as a renewed attempt to revive khilafat. These forces have often questioned the loyalty of Muslims to the nation and demonized them as being 'pan-Islamists'.

It is in the midst of such consistent attacks, including those orchestrated by the state, that Jamia is celebrating its hundredth birth anniversary. However, the centenary celebrations of the establishment of Jamia provide an opportunity to counter this hateful propaganda. It would therefore be a useful exercise to recall the journey of Jamia and remember some of the key ideas of its founders.

There is no doubt, Jamia Millia Islamia has come a long way in its hundred-year journey to become a top central university in the country. The success of Jamia as the people's university lies in the fact that over ten thousand students are enrolled every academic year. It should not be forgotten that those studying in Jamia are mostly from the lower strata of society. A good number of them, of course, are from poor Muslim families. Furthermore, it should be noted that Jamia has a distinction of imparting education in multiple subjects, ranging from science, to arts, humanities and the social sciences. In the course of time, it has added an engineering department as well as an exclusive dental college. From education, law and fine arts to mass media and international relations, Jamia has become one of the favoured educational destinations for students.

Jamia is among the few universities in the country that runs a primary school, enrolling kids from pre-nursery to eventually confer a doctoral degree. Yet, attempts have often been made to malign its image and give it a 'sectarian' tag. While the university remains a 'land of hope' (*dyar-e-shauq*) and a 'land of dreams' (*dyar-*

e-aarzoo) for the marginalized communities, it is demonized as a den of 'Muslim separatism'. While the university has ensured top ranking, the Hindutva communal forces, which comprise the social base of the government currently in power, are hell bent on calling it 'anti-Hindu' and 'anti-national'. Even at the height of communal tensions during the Ram temple mobilization and the Gujarat communal violence, Jamia remained calm and peaceful. Yet, the paradoxical and, moreover, nonsensical charge that it discriminates against the majority community, persists.

This irony points to the predicament of minorities in our country. It is also an indicator of the fact that communal forces are active in their efforts to erase the history of composite nationalism, secularism and Hindu-Muslim unity, the ideals whose physical manifestation has been Jamia Millia Islamia. Against such a backdrop, remembering the anti-colonial and secular legacy of Jamia has become even more necessary.

History is witness to the fact that Jamia emerged from the womb of India's freedom struggle. It was established during the Khilafat/Non-Cooperation Movement. Even a critic of Indian nationalism, Aziz Ahmad, called the Khilafat Movement 'the period of the closet Hindu-Muslim political solidarity in the entire history of the sub-continent.' As Aziz puts it, 'In 1919 Muhammad Ali and his brother Shaukat Ali, freed from internment, brought the consensus of Muslims with them into the Congress and into the Muslim organizations like the Khilafat Conference and Jamiat al-ulama-i-Hind working in close cooperation with it. The years 1919-22 represented the period of the closest Hindu-Muslim political solidarity in the entire history of the sub-continent.'⁶

ary 2020. Accessed online, 19 January 2021, URL, <https://thewire.in/video/karan-thapar-ap-shah-interview-caa-secularism>

4. 'Yah hai Jamia se Zafarabad tak Zahar Phailane Walon ki Haqiqat', *Panchjanya*, 23 December 2019. Accessed online, 18 January 2021, URL, <https://www.panchjanya.com/Encyc/2019/12/23/This-is-the-reality-of-poison-spreaders-from-Jamia-to-Zafarabad-on-cao-matter-.html>

5. Ishtiaq Husain Qureshi, *The Muslim Community of the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent (610:1947): A Brief Historical Analysis*. Renaissance Publishing House, Delhi, 1985, p. 309.

Noted historian of education, Suresh Chandra Ghosh, showed that Jamia came into being after the Congress passed a resolution in its Nagpur session (1920) to establish a national educational institution.

The Nagpur resolution of the Congress called for 'the gradual withdrawal of children from schools and colleges owned, aided or controlled by the government, and in place of such schools and colleges, the establishment of national schools and colleges in the various provinces.' Soon after the resolution, 'national' schools and colleges were set up in different cities around the country such as Calcutta, Lahore, Ahmadabad, Benares, Patna and Poona. One special feature of the national educational institutes was that of imparting education in the mother tongue with the objective that they would flourish as leaders for the national movement. Apart from Visva Bharati, the Gurukul, Azad schools in Uttar Pradesh, Jamia⁷ was founded on 29 October 1920 in Aligarh by the old boys of freedom-loving students of the famous M.A.O. College Aligarh (now Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh).⁸

6. Aziz Ahmad, *Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment*. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1964, pp. 267-268.

7. To know Jamia's history and the makers of Jamia, see Sheila McDonough, 'The Spirit of the Jamia Millia Islamia as Exemplified in the Writings of S. Abid Hussain' in Robert D. Baird (ed.), *Religion in Modern India*. Manohar, New Delhi, 2005; M. Mujeeb, *Zakir Husain: A Biography*. National Book Trust of India, New Delhi, 1972; A.G. Noorani, *President Zakir Husain: A Quest for Excellence*. Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1967; Zakir Hussain, *Dynamic University*. Asia Publishing House, London, 1965; V.S. Mathur (ed.), *Zakir Husain: Educationist and Teacher*. Arya Book Depot, New Delhi, 1969; W.C. Smith, *Modern Islam in India: A Social Analysis*. Minerva Book Shop, Lahore, 1943.

8. To learn about the institutional history of Aligarh and Jamia, see S.M. Tonki, *Aligarh and Jamia: Fight for National Education System*. People's Publishing House, New

Delhi, 1983, p. 1; See also S.M. Tonki, *Baniye Jamia*. n.d.

It is worth noting that Jamia was inaugurated by Deoband chief, Shaikhul-ul-Hind Maulana Mahmud Hasan, whose anti-British struggle is etched in the pages of history.⁹ Also note that the founders and makers of Jamia all believed in and lived the ideals of achieving freedom and Hindu-Muslim unity. From Mohammad Ali, Dr Mukhtar Ahmad Ansari, Hakim Ajmal Khan to Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Zakir Husain and Mohammad Mujeeb, they all were great ambassadors as well as theoreticians of composite nationalism.¹⁰ Not surprisingly, when Jamia was established, six goals were spelt out. One of them was love for the country (*watan doosti*) and composite nationalism (*muttahida qaumiyyat*).¹¹

Delivering the inaugural address, Maulana Mahmud Hasan of Deoband quoted Gandhi: 'Inauguration of an independent university has been announced which will be free from government assistance and its influence, and its entire working will be based on Islamic characteristics and national sentiments.'¹² Later, Mahmud Hasan's disciple Maulana Hussain Ahmad Madani, theoretically justified the idea of composite nationalism. Drawing on the history of Islam

9. Syeda Saiyidain Hameed, *Zakir Husain: Teacher Who Became President*. Indian Council for Cultural Relations, Har-Anand Publications, New Delhi, 2000, p. 49.

10. Mushirul Hasan (ed.), *Muslims and the Congress, Select Correspondence of Dr. M.A. Ansari 1921-1935*. Manohar, New Delhi, 1973; Mushirul Hasan, *M.A. Ansari, Gandhi's Infallible Guide*. Manohar, New Delhi, 2010.

11. Shamshur Rahman Mohsini, *Hindustani Musalmanon ki Qaumi Taleemi Tahrik*. Maktaba Jamia, New Delhi, 1986, p. 37.

12. Syed Masroor Ali Akhtar Hashmi, *Muslim Response to Western Education: A Study of Four Pioneer Institutions*. Commonwealth Publishers, New Delhi, 1989, p. 152.

and the life of the Prophet, Maulana Hussain Ahmad Madani went on to defend Hindu-Muslim unity and a united fight against British rule.

Elaborating the key argument, he said:

'Composite nationalism of Indian citizens aims to entice them in the spirit of national unity and freedom so that they can liberate themselves from the clutches of an oppressive foreign power. A foreign power that has plundered their treasure, wealth and happiness; destroyed the fabric of their religion, tradition, culture, art and craft; demolished their language and educational system; trampled upon their honour and pride; demolished their self-respect and courage, and eroded their unity, love and human traits. An imposed government that has irreparably damaged each and every religion and culture on Indian soil, especially Muslims whom it has relegated to the lowest rung through its cunning diplomacy.

'In the prevailing situation, only nationalism can generate the power of gravitation among people of different religions in India. To produce this power of gravitation, composite nationalism is very essential so that all *aqwam* (different religious groups) living in India join hands and wage a war of freedom, standing shoulder to shoulder with each other, in order to usher in peace and prosperity in the country. There is no other way to protect our religion and culture from the British onslaught. It is this united action that is intended by the term composite nationalism. It is not intended to convey what my adversaries have interpreted that (would mean) after jettisoning Islam one should come under such a system that is synonymous with atheism and agnosticism.'¹³

13. Maulana Hussain Ahmad Madani, *Composite Nationalism and Islam (Muttahida Qaumiyyat aur Islam)*, translated by

What Madani basically laid stress on was the secular character of nationalism and citizenship. He said that people of different faiths could live together within one country. His argument went against the idea of the two-nation theory and the foundation of a country based on religion. Maulana Azad who was also associated with the Jamia movement, held the same view, that religion cannot be the basis of the formation of a party and a country. Thus, Maulana Azad, as Congress President, never accepted the Muslim League as being the sole spokesperson of Muslims, and also that Congress had no right to represent Muslims.

Azad, in his book *India Wins Freedom*, strongly rebutted the logic of Jinnah in the following words: 'Mr Jinnah's demand was that Congress could nominate all the Hindu members but all the Muslim members must be nominees of the League. I pointed out that Congress could never accept such a demand. It had approached all political problems from a national point of view and recognized no distinction between Hindus and Muslims on political issues. It could not in any circumstances agree to be an organization of Hindus alone. I therefore insisted that the Congress should have the freedom to nominate any Indian it liked regardless of whether he was a Hindu or a Muslim or a Christian or a Parsi or a Sikh. Congress should participate on

Mohammad Anwer Hussain. Manohar, New Delhi, 2005 (1938), pp. 128-129. See also Tara Chand, *Influence of Islam on Indian Culture*. The Indian Press, Allahabad, 1968; M. Mujeeb, *Islamic Influence on Indian Society*. Meenakshi Prakashan, Meeruth, 1972; M. Mujeeb, *Social Reform Among Indian Muslims*. Delhi School of Social Work, Delhi, 1968; M. Mujeeb, *The Indian Muslims*. Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, New Delhi, 1967; S. Abid Husain, *The National Culture of India*. National Book Trust, New Delhi, 1978; S. Abid Husain, *Gandhi and Communal Unity*. Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1969.

the basis of Indian nationhood or not participate at all. So far as the Muslim League was concerned, it was for it to decide who should be its nominees.'¹⁴

Unfortunately, these facts are deliberately ignored and those promoting religious nationalism, ironically, are accusing Jamia of being 'anti-national' and promoting 'Muslim separatism'.

Though Jamia was founded in Aligarh, it was relocated in 1925 to Karol Bagh, Delhi.¹⁵ On 1 March 1935, the foundation of Jamia in Okhla was laid in the presence of Dr Ansari, Zakir Husain, Rajendra Prasad, Bhulabhai Desai, Vallabhbhai Patel and Halide Edid. A year later in 1936, Jamia finally came to Okhla. During the early days, Hakim Ajmal Khan was made the Amir-i-Jamia from 1920-27. Jamia also attracted big personalities to its campus such as educationalist Zakir Husain and historian M. Mujeeb. In 1960, when Jamia was celebrating its 40th anniversary, President Rajendra Prasad and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru visited it. Three years later in 1963, Jamia was declared a 'deemed university'. But it had to wait almost three decades to join the prestigious club of central universities in 1990.¹⁶

During its hundred-year journey, Jamia underwent several hardships as well. In the beginning at Aligarh, Jamia was run in 'a handful of tents'. From there, it worked on to get 'the sprawling 210-acre campus in South Delhi'. While its budget was very small in the 1920s, its current budget runs into several thousand lakhs.¹⁷ Amid

14. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, *India Wins Freedom*. Orient BlackSwan, 2007, pp. 136-137.

15. Suresh Chandra Ghosh, *The History of Education in Modern India: 1757-1998* (revised and updated edition). Orient Longman, Hyderabad, 2000, p. 152.

16. Mushirul Hasan and Rakhshanda Jalil, *Partners in Freedom: Jamia Millia Islamia*. Niyogi Books, New Delhi, 2006.

all these ups and downs, one thing remained constant: Jamia's ideals of composite nationalism and Hindu-Muslim unity. Mushirul Hasan and Rakhshanda Jalil also demonstrate how from its early days Jamia was linked to the anti-colonial freedom struggle and the idea of a 'composite culture'. As they put it, 'A product of the anti-colonial movement, Jamia was nurtured by men and women deeply committed to the nationalist cause, to the fostering of composite culture and a creative synthesis of "traditional" and "modern" learning.'¹⁸

The syllabus of Jamia clearly bore the stamp of composite culture, which was drawn up by Mohammad Ali. He supported 'cultural autonomy' for the religious communities as well as 'cooperation' and 'coexistence' of people belonging to different faiths. In 1926, Mohammad Ali¹⁹ writes in *Hamdard* and makes it clear that Jamia's door was open to all:

'Jamia Millia Islamia is first a Jamia, i.e., a university. And then it is a Millia, a group of followers of a faith. In other words, it is a teaching institution where both religious and other, i.e., worldly, education is imparted. It does not restrict itself to teaching only religious matters, as is the case with Deoband and Madarsa Nizamia. It also does not limit its education to that of the current English language schools. And then this Jamia is Jamia-i Islamia, so that it teaches Islam. It must be noted, however, that its doors are open to followers of all religions. The curriculum of the Jamia includes learning the Arabic

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. For more on Khilafat through the writings of Mohamed Ali, see Mushirul Hasan, *Mohammad Ali: Ideology and Politics*. Manohar, New Delhi, 1981 and M.A. Afzal Iqbal (ed.), *Writings and Speeches of Maulana Mohamed Ali*. Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf, Kashmiri Bazar, Lahore, 1944.

language, so that the students can understand both the Quran and Hadith (the saying of the Prophet) as much as the unlettered man in the time of the Prophet could. Although one should refer to scholarly commentaries of the Quran, one should not be entirely dependent on them nor on others for following the basic tenets of Islam.'

The fight against foreign rule was one of the stated goals of Jamia, according to Mohammad Ali. As he stated that 'Jamia's objective is that Muslims should neither follow blindly the previous "fixed" path, nor should they believe that the essence of religion lies in a few problems of jurisprudence... the Jamia has instilled hatred in the heart of every student – be he a Muslim or a Hindu – against subjugation by foreign powers. It has kept its air free of transgression and prejudice. For these reasons, the Jamia is both Jamia Islamia and a national university.'²⁰ Hakim Ajmal Khan, one of the founders of Jamia, too echoed the same sentiment, while speaking at the first convocation address of Jamia in 1921. He outlined Jamia's objective of promoting 'a deep sense of love for motherland' and respect for religious tolerance.

Hakim Ajmal Khan's ideas were not different from those of Mahatma Gandhi. He believed that one could reach God through a different path and therefore all religions were equal. Stressing the need for equal respect for all religions, Gandhi stated that 'I believe in the fundamental truth of all great religions of the world. And I believe that only we could, all of us, read the scriptures of the different faiths from the standpoint of the followers of those faiths, we should find that they were at the bottom, all one and were all helpful to one another.'²¹

20. Cited in Hasan and Jalil, *ibid.*, pp. 66-67.

It is worth noting that Gandhi had a close association with Jamia, which he visited on 2 November 1927, accompanied by Hakim Ajmal Khan, Dr Ansari, the Ali brothers, Jamnalal Bajaj and Mahadev Desai. Three years later in 1930, Mahatma went to Jamia again and said, 'when I come to the Jamia, I feel I have come home.'²² Giving details about Gandhi's attachment to Jamia, Hasan and Jalil wrote that 'Gandhi... helped at every critical occasion, not only financially but also with encouragement and appreciation. Jamnalal Bajaj, his industrial disciple, Devdas Gandhi, his son, and Mahadev Desai, his close friend, was [were] associated with Jamia. He sent his grandson Rasiklal to study in Jamia. Moreover, the Mahatma's steadfast attitude and wise, far-sighted and broad point of view on affairs of national importance were a source of comfort and good counsel.'²³

It is the legacy of Hindu-Muslim unity and composite nationalism that has worked as a motor for Jamia. From the days of its inception, people from all faiths had equal access to it. Beyond the allegation of 'anti-national' and 'anti-Hindu', Jamia is a true embodiment of the idea of India. It belongs as much to Hindus as to Muslims or any other community. Jamia also provided space for learning together and living together. While studying together, the students of Jamia have come to appreciate different cultures and religions and developed a strong bond to national unity.

Hasan and Jalil have argued that 'Hindu and Muslim students not only studied together, but ate and lived

21. M.S. Deshpande, *Light of India: The Message of the Mahatma*. Wilco Publishing House, 1958. Accessed online 20 January 2020, URL, <https://www.mkgandhi.org/religionmk.htm>

22. M. Hasan and Jalil, *ibid.*, p. 125.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

together. Under their green *chogha*, they wore white khaddar *pyjamas*, *dhoti*, even the occasional *shalwar*. Mill-made cloth was shunned, be it for dress or upholstery. Khaddar sheets would be placed over rough cotton *durries* as straw mats on the floor. Several teachers left their homes in far-off lands to live spartan but enriching lives. Some of them were P.S. Gupta, the science teacher, Surya Kant Shastri, the Sanskrit instructor, and D.P. Singal, who taught both the *Gita* and economics. The best loved of them all was A.J. Kellat from Kerala. Obaidul Haq, a former school student, remembers him coming to the hostel on a bitterly cold morning to wake up the inmates for morning prayers. By the time Kellat joined, arrangements had also been made to teach not just Hindu theology but also Hindi to those who did not study Urdu.'²⁴

Not surprisingly, industrialists G.D. Birla and Jamnalal Bajaj contributed to Jamia. While Hindu communalists have a problem with Jamia for its secular character, a section of elite Muslims found it difficult to reconcile with its rejection of Muslim nationalism. Aziz Ahmad, otherwise an eminent Islamic scholar, could not hide his bias in favour of Muslim nationalism. As a result, he jumped to the conclusion that Jamia Millia Islamia, soon after its establishment, 'came under the influence of pro-Congress Muslim leaders like Abul Kalam Azad, Mukhtar Ahmad Ansari and Hakim Ajmal Khan.'²⁵ These charges are untenable and perhaps another side of the Hindu communal propaganda that Jamia is 'anti-Hindu'. Jamia is neither 'anti-Hindu', nor 'pro-Congress'. Jamia is, in fact, an epitome of the idea of India.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

25. Aziz Ahmad, *An Intellectual History of Islam in India*. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1969, p. 63.